

Workers react to CFAC news

By **CHRIS PETERSON** Hungry Horse News | Posted: Wednesday, March 11, 2015 8:37 am

Longtime employees at the Columbia Falls Aluminum Co. smelter reacted to last week's announcement that the plant will be permanently closed and scrapped out with sadness and finality. At one point, the plant employed more than 1,500 men and women, but it has sat idle since October 2009.

"I hoped I would never see the day I read that in the newspaper," said Lee Smith, a former plant manager who retired 21 years ago.

Smith started work at the smelter in June 1956 as a laboratory engineer for the Anaconda Aluminum Co. Fresh out of Montana State University, Smith went on to several promotions and became plant manager.

Smith said he couldn't speak to whether the plant was still viable today — power, raw material and metal markets had changed since he retired.

Loyal Chubb was the plant's longest serving employee at nearly 48 years. He started sweeping floors at the plant in 1956 at age 18, earning a little more than \$2 an hour.

"It was good pay compared to most other work in the valley and stayed one of the higher-paying companies throughout my work there," he said.

Chubb went on to become a machinist at the plant. Long retired, Chubb still has several milling machines at his home.

"I still like to do that kind of stuff," he said.

He said he'll miss the plant.

"I really would have liked to have seen the plant stay open and productive," he said. "There was a lot of money spread throughout the valley from the plant."

Vic Cordier started working at the smelter in 1955 and worked there 31 years.

"They hadn't started production when I began working there," he said.

He did a "little bit of everything" at the plant and retired in 1986 after 31 years. He said the plant was good to him.



Sixty years ago at the aluminum plant

Vic Cordier, fourth from left, with the electrical and rectifier union officers shortly after the Anaconda Aluminum Co. began operating. Photo by Mel Ruder

“It let me build a home and pay for that and put my kid through college,” he said.

Cordier said he didn’t think the plant would restart when it shut down in 2009, but he was surprised Glencore, the smelter’s owner, had plans to scrap it.

Former Aluminum Workers Trades Council president Dave Toavs said he suspects Glencore bought the plant for its power contract. The Swiss-based global commodities trader made millions selling power back to the Bonneville Power Administration during the West Coast energy crisis in 2000 and 2001. The power was worth far more than any aluminum they could ever produce, he said.

Toavs said he wasn’t sure if the plant was still viable, but he said he’s glad Glencore finally admitted it would never restart the plant.

“There were still a lot of people who thought they’d fire it up,” he said.

Company officials had said they were hoping the closure was just temporary.

“In my opinion, it was all a lie,” Toavs said. “At least now it’s over.”